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ABSTRACT

In most elementary schools in the United States, students get their first systematic introduction to history as a discipline and to chronological treatment of U.S. history as subject matter in fifth-grade U.S. history courses. To develop information about the knowledge and misconceptions concerning U.S. history that fifth-grade teachers can expect to see in their incoming students, the study interviewed students who were nearing completion of the fourth grade about U.S. history topics that they would be taught in the fifth grade. The students' responses revealed that they possessed generally accurate knowledge about history and the work of historians or about the founding and development of the United States as a nation. They had picked up bits and pieces of information in holiday or state history units in earlier grades or through reading, television, or other out-of-school experiences, but these were not yet subsumed within a systematic network of knowledge. Furthermore, accurate information items often were connected in the students' minds with various types of inaccurate beliefs (naive misconceptions, conflations, and imaginative elaborations). The students' answers to 23 questions are described and illustrated through excerpts from their interview responses, and these findings then are discussed with emphasis on their implications for establishing a context for learning U.S. history and developing certain key ideas so as to promote understanding and clear up misconceptions. (Author/DB)

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Elementary Subjects Center
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WHAT DO ENTERING FIFTH GRADERS KNOW ABOUT AMERICAN HISTORY?

Jere Brophy, Bruce VanSledright,
and Nancy Bredin

Center for the Learning and Teaching of Elementary Subjects

Institute for Research on Teaching

College of Education

Michigan State University

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The work is designed to unfold in three phases, beginning with literature review and interview studies designed to elicit and synthesize the points of view of various stakeholders (representatives of the underlying academic disciplines, intellectual leaders and organizations concerned with curriculum and instruction in school subjects, classroom teachers, state- and district-level policymakers) concerning ideal curriculum, instruction, and evaluation practices in these five content areas at the elementary level. Phase II involves interview and observation methods designed to describe current practice, and in particular, best practice as observed in the classrooms of teachers believed to be outstanding. Phase II also involves analysis of curricula (both widely used curriculum series and distinctive curricula developed with special emphasis on conceptual understanding and higher order applications), as another approach to gathering information about current practices. In Phase III, models of ideal practice will be developed, based on what has been learned and synthesized from the first two phases, and will be tested through classroom intervention studies.

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Abstract

In most elementary schools in the United States, students get their first systematic introduction to history as a discipline and to chronological treatment of United States history as subject matter in fifth-grade American history courses. To develop information about the knowledge and misconceptions concerning American history that fifth-grade teachers can expect to see in their incoming students, we interviewed students who were nearing completion of the fourth grade about American history topics that they would be taught in the fifth grade. The students' responses revealed that they possessed generally accurate knowledge about conditions of everyday life in the "old days" but very little systematic information about history and the work of historians or about the founding and development of the United States as a nation. They had picked up bits and pieces of information in holiday or state history units in earlier grades or through reading, television, or other out-of-school experiences, but these were not yet subsumed within a systematic network of knowledge. Furthermore, accurate information items often were connected in the students' minds with various types of inaccurate beliefs (naive misconceptions, conflations, and imaginative elaborations). The students' answers to 23 questions are described and illustrated through excerpts from their interview responses, and these findings are then discussed with emphasis on their implications for establishing a context for learning American history and developing certain key ideas so as to promote understanding and clear up misconceptions.

WHAT DO ENTERING FIFTH GRADERS KNOW ABOUT AMERICAN HISTORY?

Jere Brophy, Bruce VanSledright, and Nancy Bredin[1]

Current theory and research on subject-matter teaching emphasize the importance of teaching school subjects for understanding, appreciation, and application, not just knowledge memorization and skills practice. Drawing on neo-Vygotskian theorizing and work on knowledge construction, conceptual change, and situated learning, educators have been developing methods of teaching school subjects in ways that connect with students' existing knowledge and experience and engage them in actively constructing new knowledge and correcting existing misconceptions. Progress is most evident in mathematics and science, where rich literatures have developed describing what children typically know (or think they know) about the content taught at their respective grade levels. Curriculum developers can then use this information as a basis for developing instruction that both builds on students' existing valid knowledge and confronts and corrects their misconceptions.

The potential for applying similar concepts and methods to curriculum development appears to be at least as great in social studies as in other school subjects, but realization of this potential cannot occur until a significant knowledge base is developed describing children's knowledge and misconceptions about the social studies content commonly taught at each grade level. The authors have initiated a program of research designed to address this issue by interviewing elementary students before and after each of their social studies units.

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We have begun at the fifth-grade level. This was an interesting place to start because fifth graders are generally both more knowledgeable and easier to interview than younger elementary students, but they have not yet had a systematic introduction to American history, which is the focus of the fifth-grade social studies curriculum in most schools. To begin to develop information about what typical fifth-graders know (or think they know) about history as a discipline and about American history as a body of knowledge, we have been interviewing a stratified sample of 10 fifth graders who attend an elementary school located in a working class/lower middle class suburb of Lansing, Michigan.

All of the students are white, as are the vast majority of their classmates. Five are boys and five are girls. Within each gender group, the sample has been stratified to include two high achievers, two average achievers, and one low achiever, based on academic achievement in fourth grade. Because we could interview no more than 10 students due to resource limitations, we chose to weight the sample toward higher achievers, in the expectation that this would yield more substantive responses. The data presented in this paper come from the initial interview, which was held in the spring of 1990 when the students were still in the fourth grade. Unlike subsequent interviews that focus in more detail on the content taught in particular units, this interview asked about the full range of topics that would be addressed in the fifth-grade American history course (as reported by the fifth-grade teacher). The students were interviewed individually in a quiet room outside of their classroom for 15-30 minutes. General trends in the findings are summarized in Table 1. The presentation will elaborate on these generalizations and include noteworthy quotes from individual students.

Table 1

Key Elements in the Students' Responses to Each Question

	Jason	Tim	Mark	Brad	Ned	Teri	Sue	Helen	Kay	Rita	BOYS	GIRLS	TOTAL
Gender	M	M	M	M	M	F	F	F	F	F			
Achievement Level	H	H	M	M	L	H	H	M	M	L			
1. What is history?													
Refers to the past	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	3	5	8
Happened long ago	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	2	5	7
Noteworthy people or events	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	3	4
2. What do historians do?													
Study or teach history	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	3
3. How do they get information?													
Artifacts/digs	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	2	4	6
Books	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	2	3	5
Interview living witnesses	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	2	2	4
4. How do they settle disputes?													
Get more or better information	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	4	2	6
Sift evidence, then decide	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	3	4
Consult authority	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	2	2
5. How could you decide what to believe?													
Sift evidence, then decide	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	3	4	7
Consult authority figure	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	4	5
6. Do you have your own personal history?													
Immediate yes	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2
Eventual yes	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	4	2	6
Unsure or no	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	2

7. Does the country have a history?													
Yes	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	5	5	10
History began at discovery	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	3	4	7
Country began via war or Constitution	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
8. What is this and what does it tell us?													
Knows function of candlestick	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	5	5	10
9. What is this and what does it tell us?													
Knows function of time line	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	5	5	10
10. Why study history?													
For a job	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2
"So you will know"	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	5	8
Specific life application	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	2	4
11. How could history help you in life?													
Doesn't know	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	2	2	4
"So you will know"	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	2	3
Specific life application	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	3
12. Why was America called the New World?													
Discovered while seeking route to China	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	4	4	8
13. Who were the explorers?													
Tried to find things	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	5	9
Looked around to see what was there	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	3	4
14. Who discovered America?													
Columbus	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	4	3	7
15. How did the Indians get here?													
Land bridge	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
16. What are colonies?													
Parcel of land or settlement	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	5	8
Ruled from afar	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1

17. Why did people come to the colonies?													
Doesn't know	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	4	1	5
Explore or trade	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	3	3
Escape oppression/Find better life	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	3	4
18. Who were the Pilgrims and why did they come?													
Mayflower	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	3	3	6
Helpful Indians/Thanksgiving	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	3	5
Plymouth Rock	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	4	4
Hard times	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	3	3
Escape oppression/Find better life	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	3
19. Who owned the colonies?													
England	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	3	1	4
20. How did the colonies become the United States?													
War/Constitution	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
21. What was the Revolutionary War?													
Correct statements only	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	2	3
Correct plus incorrect	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	3	4
Doesn't know or incorrect	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
22. What was the Civil War?													
North vs. South	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
23. What do you know about wagon trains, the frontier, or the pioneers?													
Westward movement	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
Correct general idea about pioneers or frontier	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	4	3	7

Overview of Findings

Several questions dealt with the nature of history and the work of historians. Students gave generally correct answers when asked "What is history?" although instead of simply saying that history can refer to anything that has happened in the past, they tended to specify that history refers to events that occurred *long ago* or to events that were *noteworthy* in some respect. Many of them had trouble with the notion that they each had their own personal histories. When asked where such personal histories began, some said on their birth date, but others said on the date that they first did something that they considered noteworthy (an academic or athletic accomplishment).

The students were unfamiliar with the work of historians and had difficulty envisioning it. They understood the notion of interviewing living witnesses to events in the recent past, but they had difficulty envisioning how historians might work to reconstruct events farther into the past, except for the work of archeologists establishing the existence of ancient peoples or learning something about their lives from digging up and analyzing physical artifacts. Many of the students did not distinguish clearly between historians and archeologists, and the majority seemed unfamiliar with the notion of historians working from books, diaries, and other written sources of information about events for which there were no living witnesses. The students also were unfamiliar with the notion of history as interpretive, instead picturing historians as gathering factual information through their investigations. When asked how historians might resolve disagreements, some students simply didn't know; others spoke of going back to get more or better information (typically via physical artifacts); and still others spoke of taking the matter to "the" authority on the subject for a definitive ruling.

The students retained bits and pieces of historical information that they had picked up in earlier grades or in experiences out of school but possessed no systematic information about the history of the United States as a country. They were familiar with time lines (their fourth-grade teacher had used them as aids to story comprehension during reading instruction) and with the functions and implications of the candle holders that we showed them as examples of artifacts (they understood that these candle holders had handles because in the old days people did not have electric lights and thus needed to carry candles with them in the dark). The students also were familiar with the notion of a new world that had been discovered by Europeans seeking a shorter way to China.

However, none of the students knew about the land bridge or where the Native Americans had come from, and most were vague about who the Europeans were and why they were exploring the New World (other than to find a shorter way to China). They were vague about the notion of a colony, and most could not name any of the people who came to America to settle, even the Pilgrims. They were able to respond when asked directly about the Pilgrims but usually only in the narrow context of the story of the first Thanksgiving.

No student gave a clear account of how the colonies became the United States. Several suggested that a war was involved but were unclear or incorrect about who fought the war or why. They were similarly vague and confused about the Civil War. Many answers to both sets of questions about wars produced conflations with what the students had learned in fourth grade (as part of a unit on Michigan history) about French and Indian War battles that occurred in Michigan. When asked about wagon trains, pioneers, and the frontier, the students showed awareness that people had to travel by horse and wagon in the days before motor vehicles but did not show awareness of the general

westward migration pattern or of the notion of a wagon train as a line of wagons moving together.

The findings suggested some interesting subgroup differences, although not enough students were interviewed to allow for statistical testing. In general, the high achievers (Jason, Tim, Teri, and Sue) spoke succinctly and to the point when they knew or thought they knew an answer but said little or nothing beyond "I don't know" when they did not. In contrast, the average (Mark, Brad, Helen, and Kay) and low achievers (Ned, Rita) tended to be more wordy in their responses. Usually, however, their lengthier responses were not qualitatively better than the high achievers' briefer responses. One reason for this was that the average or low achievers often took more words to say essentially the same thing that the high achievers had said more economically (e.g., the average or low achievers might give several examples of a more general idea, whereas the high achievers might articulate the idea itself). These findings may be related to those of Estvan and Estvan (1959) who noted a tendency for children being interviewed about social studies topics to take less time to respond, speak with more facility, and use fewer words, yet produce a greater number of ideas, when talking about familiar rather than unfamiliar topics. A second reason for the lengthier responses of the average and low achievers was that they were usually more willing to speculate if they were not sure of their answers. However, these speculations often yielded naive misconceptions, conflations, or even extended narratives that combined accurate information with misinformation and fanciful or imaginative elaborations. Several of these will be highlighted as examples of misconceptions that will have to be addressed via a conceptual change approach to introducing fifth graders to American history.

There were some interesting gender differences in response patterns. The boys used more technical terms and knew more about wars, but the girls knew more about the colonies in general and the Pilgrims in particular. Also, the girls' responses were generally longer than those of the boys.

Details of the Findings for Each Question

1. *Next year in social studies you will be learning about history. Do you know what history is? (If students do not know or answer incorrectly, prepare them for the next questions by telling them that history is the study of the past--of who were the people who came before us and how they used to live back then.)*

Ned had no answer to this question, and Brad guessed that history dealt with nature or wildlife. The other eight students gave generally correct responses indicating that history concerns people or events in the past.

Tim: It's stuff that happe[illegible] long time ago that's real good.

Sue: It's about what people [illegible]d for our country a long time ago and the wars and stuff like that.

Kay: People who explored or found things and started things like who found Michigan or something or explored it . . . people long ago who traveled across the world.

Of the eight students who responded generally correctly, seven specif[illegible]d that history refers to events that occurred *long* ago, four specified that history refers to *noteworthy* people or events, and three (all girls) gave examples (wars, explorers, kings and queens). Levstik and Pappas (1987) also found that fourth graders tended to distinguish "history" from the past in general by specifying that history refers to *important* events that happened *long ago*. They also found a tendency among fourth graders to give wars, tragedies, or disasters as examples, but we found this in only one of the 10 students we interviewed.

These findings indicate that most children enter fifth grade knowing that history is about the past. However, they tend to project a mythic quality to

it, viewing it primarily as stories about very famous people in the very distant past (see Egan, 1989). Most of these children do not yet realize that history also includes the very recent past and the everyday lives of ordinary people.

2. *What do historians do? (If students do not know or answer incorrectly, prepare them for the next question by telling them that historians study and write about history--they are the ones who write the history books.)*

Six students could not answer this question, one guessed "famous people like George Washington," one said people who teach history, and two said people who study history. Thus, although most of the students were familiar with history, they were not familiar with the term "historian."

3. *How do you think historians do their work--how do they find out about what happened and decide what to write?*

Nine students (all but Ned) responded to this question. Their answers were generally sensible but frequently confused historians with archeologists. The higher achievers tended to emphasize interviewing and library research, whereas the lower achievers tended to emphasize physical artifacts and archeological digs.

> *Jason*: Go looking for it where early people were. (Where would they look?) Library. Think about it and write what they think.
>
> *Brad*: They find bones and fossils . . . things they left behind and some people that still lived a little bit later. (What about them?) Some people that could live kind of longer than the others, they might be able to live long enough to pass on a story or give something that they had to people and those people pass it on to historians.
>
> *Sue*: Maybe people back then wrote books about these people that saved their country or something, so they read some of the stuff that the people wrote and then wrote it in a book with a whole bunch of other people.
>
> *Kay*: They find symbols and stuff in the woods or on the ground . . . like old cabins or something or old stuff that they used to use.
>
> *Rita*: They'd try to dig something up that they could use to find out, like dinosaur bones . . . or they'd read the writing on the walls, like

some Indians write on the walls and they'd read books to find out more . . . they could talk to people that are older.

These answers elaborate the trend seen in the previous question, indicating that these students did not know much about historians and tended to picture them working by digging up physical artifacts rather than by interviewing witnesses or reading written records. Five students mentioned books as written records, but none mentioned newspapers or diaries. The girls generally had more to say than the boys, typically mentioning at least two different sources that historians might exploit (typically living interviewees, books, or physical artifacts).

4. *Sometimes historians disagree about what happened in the past, why it happened, or what it all means. When they disagree, how can they decide what is right?*

Eight students responded to this question. Of these, six mentioned going back to get more or better information, four mentioned some kind of logical reasoning process or debate that would lead to a considered judgment, and two mentioned taking the matter to an authority figure to decide. However, the responses tended to be vague and uncertain. The students appeared to be constructing sensible guesses rather than speaking from knowledge.

Jason: People that wrote it, they look at it, they might not have enough equipment so then the person reads it with all the equipment, they might think "We have more equipment so we can think better."

Mark: They could read a book and if they think that it's wrong, they could read different books and see if they said something else and see if they agree with that one. (What if they seem to disagree?) They can go to some other museum and see what they say.

Sue: They can go to somebody who knows what the answer is.

Kay: They go exploring, both of them, and show each other what their proof is and see which one's right, maybe.

Rita: They'd talk to other scientists and try to see how they think and they'd try to work it out . . . like they'd take it to a judge or

> something, a judge that's higher than these scientists but that's a scientist judge. Someone that all of them trust and they'd know that he'd tell the truth . . . he'd listen to both sides and try to work it out.

Most of the students appeared to believe, at least implicitly, that one could arrive at a "right answer." In part, this was because they were thinking mostly of "existence proofs" (such as proving that King Arthur actually existed)--questions that could be answered yes or no--rather than thinking about more subtle matters of interpretation of the causes or meanings of known events. This again indicates some confusion of history with archeology, as well as a lack of knowledge about what historians try to do and how they go about trying to do it.

The students' expectation that a right answer could be reached also appears linked to certain other implicit beliefs, especially faith in either an authority figure who knows everything about the subject or in science and scientific methods (note Jason's faith in better scientific equipment to provide better answers or at least help one to think better). Related beliefs appear in the students' notions about archeology. For example, they "know" that scientists can use "machines" to date artifacts, even though they know nothing about how this process works. Their fifth-grade teacher reports that these students are "steeped in technology"--that they are familiar with and accepting of the notion that "if there's a problem, get better machines to fix it." She adds that students are still trusting of adults at this age and they believe that adults control machines, so she does not find it surprising that the students would look to a benevolent authority figure or a trustworthy machine for resolution of conflicting historical interpretations.

Rita's response to this question exemplifies a phenomenon that was observed more commonly in the students' responses to later questions about particular historical events: a tendency for certain students (especially

Helen and Rita) to construct detailed narratives when answering some of our questions. These narratives usually were delivered with confidence and included at least some accurate elements, but they also frequently included naive misconceptions, conflations (e.g., of history with archeology), or imaginative but fanciful elaborations. Additional examples of these narrative responses appear later among the excerpts included as representative answers to our questions. For analysis and additional examples of these phenomena, see VanSledright and Brophy (1991).

5. *What about you--what if you were reading about something in history that you were interested in and found that different sources disagreed? How could you decide what to believe?*

Here again, the students' answers were sensible but tentative, indicating that they lacked clear, confident ideas about what to do. Answers included looking it up in a definitive source (implying a right answer), splitting the difference to reach a ball-park estimate, trying to decide for oneself what makes the most sense, looking for a preponderance of agreement among the majority of sources, or asking a parent or teacher.

> *Brad:* I could look in other books or I could decide by myself. (How?) I'd see what I think would be most real or believable.

> *Kay:* Well, maybe the thing that made more sense or the book that explained more about it or you could ask somebody who really knew.

Of the nine students who answered this question, seven spoke of trying to decide for themselves after gathering various additional items of evidence, and five (in addition or instead) spoke of consulting an authority (an encyclopedia or a parent or teacher) to get "the" answer. The boys mentioned books but not people as information resources. However, four of the five girls spoke of asking a parent, a teacher, or "somebody who really knew." This difference may be a manifestation of more general gender differences in cognitive styles and preferences for individual versus social problem-solving contexts. In

addition, the children's fifth-grade teacher interprets it as part of a general tendency for girls to talk more about school at home than boys do.

6. *Do you have your own personal history or life history? . . . When does it begin? (What was the first day of your life history?)*

Tim and Rita immediately answered "yes" to this question and stated that their personal history began on the day that they were born. The other eight students initially said "no" or were unsure, although eventually all but Helen (who continued to be confused by her perception that history is about *ancient* events) eventually gave at least partly correct responses following probing. Several students seemed thrown by the notion of someone writing a history of them, and at least one (Jason) initially misunderstood the question to be "Has your personal life history been written?"

> *Jason*: No. I just have my work that my mom saves. (Stuff from school?) Yeah. (That's your life history?) Yes. (When do you think it first started?) When I was born.

> *Teri*: No. (If somebody wanted to write about you, could they do that?) I don't care. (I mean, would there be something to write about? Could they write the history of Teri?) Well, I guess so. (What would be the first day of your life history?) When I was born.

> *Sue*: No. (You don't? Why do you say no?) I don't know. (If somebody wanted to write a history of Sue, could they write one?) I don't know. (Is there anything to write?) I'm a swimmer. (If somebody was going to write your history, when would it begin?) Probably last year. (How come last year?) That's when I started really doing stuff and getting into sports. (If somebody wanted to write your total, complete history, though, even if it wasn't interesting, where would they start?) Probably when I was born.

> *Helen*: What do you mean by that? (I'll put it this way. Do you have a life history?) I'm not really into it that much. I like history, but it's not my life. (Let me see if I can rephrase that. You're how old?) Ten. (So from 10 years ago until now, there's all of that time. Is that like history, a history of your life?) I wouldn't say so. That's 10 years. History's gotta be more than that.

Three of the four students who answered Question #1 by specifying that history referred to *noteworthy* events in the past (Sue, Helen, and Kay) had difficulty with Question #6. Kay initially denied that she had a personal

history because she didn't think that anything in her life was noteworthy enough to qualify as history, and Helen maintained this perception even after several probes. Sue initially suggested that a history of her life would begin not on her birthday but at about age five when she started accumulating sports accomplishments.

Helen's "I like history, but it's not my life" is our favorite quote from these interviews. We are not sure whether this was an ambiguously worded statement of the idea that nothing in her life as yet has been significant enough to qualify as history or, as we prefer to believe, it was a prematurely sophisticated expression of *fin-de-siècle* ennui!

7. *What about our country--does the United States have a history? . . . When does that history begin? (Did the United States have a birthday--a day that was its first day as a country? . . . When was that?)*

Nine students said yes to the initial question; Teri responded correctly after some initial confusion. Thus, in contrast to their answers to Question #6 concerning their personal histories, all of the students knew that the country has a history. Five of them immediately stated that the country's history began when the land was discovered, and two others implied this same response. Thus, 7 of the 10 students verbalized what would ordinarily be considered the correct response (at least from the Eurocentric point of view)--that the country's history started when the New World was discovered by Europeans. Two students were confused or didn't know, and one said "when the world was born." From another point of view, the latter is also a correct answer.

> *Jason*: Yes. (When do you think that history began?) When America, the world was born. (When's your birthday?) February 23rd. (When's the United State's birthday?) When they signed the Constitution. (Do you know when that would be?) No.
>
> *Tim*: Yeah. (OK, when does that history begin?) When it was founded, when people discovered it. (Does the country have a birthday?) Yeah.

(Do you know what day it was?) No. (What happened that day that made it a country?) The Constitution . . . it's not the Constitution. Let me think. I think the British and the English battled over it and the English won . . . it was the English colonies and then it turned into the United States.

Teri: I don't know . . . a long time ago . . . I think it was in the 1700s or something like that. (Does the country have a birthday?) Yeah, but I don't know when it is. (Do you know what happened that made it a country?) I guess it was when there was some people and I can't remember what country it was called but they were trying to find a shorter way to China so they went a different way instead and they found America.

Helen: Yes. (Does it have a birthday?) Yes it does. On Columbus Day. (Tell me a little bit about Columbus and why we say that.) People say that Columbus first landed in America and named it but really what I think is another person, I can't remember his name, he found it first . . . I think he was a pirate or something and he sailed to America and named it that. After his name. It had American in it . . .

Kay: Yes. (When does that history begin?) I think when the United States was discovered and people found it. (Does the United States have a birthday?) Yeah. (What can you tell me about it?) It's called Earth Day, I think.

Surprisingly, none of the students mentioned the Fourth of July as the nation's birthday. Elementary students learn about Columbus Day, Thanksgiving, and other holidays in holiday units in the early grades, but apparently July Fourth is not included among these because it occurs in the summer. In response to the birthday question, five students did not know, two said when the *Constitution* was signed, two said when the land was discovered (counting Helen's "Columbus Day" response here), and one said Earth Day. Although the Fourth of July is traditionally called the nation's birthday, it should be noted that the "discovery of the land" and "signing of the Constitution" responses are just as valid, if not more so, from other perspectives.

Several answers displayed bits and pieces of (not always correct) history that the students picked up elsewhere. Mark and Teri knew that the land was discovered by people looking for a shorter way to China, but Mark thought that they were French. Tim knew that there was a war (although he thought that the

English defeated the British) and that the English colonies turned into the United States. Helen knew (from watching an episode of the Chipmunks cartoon show!) that Columbus was not the first to discover America and that America was named after Amerigo, but she thought that Amerigo was "a pirate or something" who got here two years before Columbus. Rita started to answer from her Michigan history learned in fourth grade but then realized that this was not relevant to the question. In general, the students' responses indicate that they knew that the country was part of a new world discovered by Europeans but not much else. This underscores their fifth-grade teacher's point that they are being introduced historically to the country as such for the first time in fifth grade.

8. *(Show candlestick artifact) . . . Do you know what this is? (Explain or clarify for student as necessary.) What does this tell us about the people who used it?*

All 10 students immediately, confidently, and correctly identified the artifact as a candleholder and then went on (in response to probing) to explain that people needed these to carry candles around with them in the days before electric lighting.

> *Tim*: Candleholder, candle, lantern . . . they took it with them so they could see where they were going . . . because if it was dark they couldn't see. They didn't have electricity back then.
>
> *Brad*: A candle and a candleholder . . . so they could see where they were going. Because we have lights in the buildings. (How come they didn't?) Cause they weren't smart that far back and they didn't know that much.
>
> *Helen*: It's an ancient candle. Let's say about 100 years, 200 . . . back then they didn't have any light bulbs where they can just pull a thing and a light would pop on. All they had was candles and the sunlight. When the sun was down they had to use a candle. When the sunlight was up, then they didn't have to worry about it . . . they didn't have lanterns and light bulbs and stuff like that. (Who would have used something like that?) Lincoln, maybe. Washington. Albert Einstein.

Rita: A candleholder. . . . In the olden days, they didn't have electricity. They were smart but they weren't as smart as us because we can learn more things because we have computers and stuff. They didn't have electricity so they had to make something so they could see in the dark so they made this.

Note that Brad and Rita believe that we have electricity now because we are smarter than people were in the olden days. Developmental psychologists also have noted a tendency in children to identify smartness with accumulation of knowledge rather than with intelligence (as adults would). Rita's response is also noteworthy as another example of the children's beliefs in the power of science and technology.

9. *(Show time line illustration) . . . This is a kind of illustration used in teaching history. Do you know what it is called? (If necessary, give the name time line. Then ask: What information does a time line give?)*

All 10 students had no trouble reading the time line that we showed them or understanding its illustrative function, although they called it by different names. Four called it a time line, three a scale, one a life line, one a history line, and one a graph. All three of the students who called the time line a "scale" were girls. Neither we nor the students' fifth-grade teacher can explain this suggestive gender difference.

Several students mentioned prior experience with time lines at school, although in reading rather than in social studies. One of their teachers had introduced time lines as a way to help them keep track of events in reading stories.

Mark: A time line. I've seen it in different books and my brother drew one for school . . . it tells what happened in a certain year about a certain subject maybe.

Ned: A graph . . . they keep track of how history goes and stuff. (How can you tell?) Cause it's 1950 to 1985.

10. *Why do you think they teach history in school--why do they think you should study the past?*

Most of the students had trouble answering this question, at least initially. Their fifth-grade teacher believes that this is because they did not really know much about history yet and so were grasping at straws. Eight of them basically said that history is taught "so that you will know what happened in the past," indicating belief in the value of learning about the past but without saying much, if anything, about why this might be important to know. One of these students suggested that you might need the information for school, and three suggested that you might need it so that you would not be embarrassed if someone asked you for the information and you did not know it.

> *Jason*: To get a good job. (How would history help you get a good job?) If you wanted to work as a teacher.
>
> *Tim*: So you'll know more about yourself.
>
> *Brad*: So we could learn about what happened . . . because if you didn't know what happened in history, it'd be the same thing as not knowing what would happen now. You'd have to know what happened in history to know what would happen in the future.
>
> *Sue*: So you the children can know about the important people back then and what they did for our country and maybe how famous they were because they were a president or something. (Why is it important to know that?) Because if somebody comes up and asks you what's the first president, you want to tell them and you would want to know. (Why would you want to know?) Because I'm sure that those people that were important back then would want people to know now what they did for people.
>
> *Kay*: So you know how the people in the past, what they did, like they didn't have electricity or heat or anything . . . so you might know a little bit more about before you were born or before your parents were born and it tells us about a long time ago that you didn't know about and told what you used.

Two students thought that learning about history might be good preparation for jobs, but when probed, one could mention only being a history teacher, and the other could mention only history teaching and being a historian. No one suggested a way that knowing history might help you in any other job.

However, four students stated or implied more general reasons for learning history than simply acquiring the specific knowledge taught. Brad

suggested that learning history would help you to understand current events and to predict the future, and Tim stated directly that learning history would help you to know more about yourself. Helen and Kay at least implied this same idea in stating that it would be helpful to know about the similarities and differences between your life now and your ancestors' lives in the past. Also, Sue's last idea is interesting and touching: People who did great things in the past would want modern people to remember and honor them for it, and we should.

Probing with Rita and Helen on Question #10 produced some interesting responses that are tangential to the topic but worth noting as examples of the thinking of 10-year-olds. Rita noted that she wanted to be a teacher ("Take after my mom") and viewed learning history in grade school as a step toward that: "When I get in college I'm going to say 'I want to be a teacher,' so they'll give me a list of classes that I should take. Grade school will help me get that. They teach me." When asked if she was glad to be living now rather than back in ancient times, Helen said "No," explaining that she would have preferred ancient times because she would not have had to go to school then. When the interviewer pointed out that back then they had to walk around with candles for light and they had no indoor bathrooms, Helen replied that "That's OK as long as they had toilet paper."

11. *How might learning about history help you in life outside of school, either now or in the future?*

Students were thrown even more by this question than the previous one. Four simply did not know and could not respond even after probing. Three suggested that history knowledge might help you in a job, at school, or at times when you wanted to be able to answer questions that others might ask you.

> *Tim*: If you were reading a book or something and you heard of this one guy, you might know about him.

Brad: I don't know . . . might help you know how you got here and how everything else got here.

Sue: 'Cause maybe if someone wanted something back then, maybe you could help them with doing it today. Maybe it was easier . . . if someone wanted a law in the country and it's still not here now, then maybe someone could carry it on and ask the people to make a law about that. . . . People that were important back then may have done something for our country like slaves, there are not slaves anymore, so somebody might have wanted the people not to be slaves so now there's no slaves.

Rita: It'll help you get your job . . . my mom's a housewife right now but she's going back to school. She had to learn history just because she had to learn history. It's like you have to learn something just because you have to. (Did you ever think that somebody decides what you have to?) Yeah, the president decides. (I was just wondering what you think their reasons are, because they must believe it's important.) It is. It is important.

Just three of the students gave answers that at least hinted at good reasons for studying history. Brad and Tim gave general knowledge/cultural literacy responses, suggesting that knowing about the past might help you to understand or learn better today. Sue suggested that studying the past might help you to recognize weaknesses or injustices that could be changed by passing new laws to correct them. Even these responses represented tentative hypotheses rather than confident knowledge, however, and they are a long way from clear recognition that history might give one perspective on personal identity or help one think through citizen action decisions.

Taken together, the students' responses to Questions 10 and 11 indicate that although most of them found history interesting and were looking forward to learning about it, they had not yet come to understand that historical knowledge could be useful in living one's everyday life or thinking critically as a citizen. Rita's "I don't know why we study it, but it must be important" purview typifies that of most of the students.

12. *Our country is in a part of the world called America. At one time, America was called the New World. Do you know why it was called the New World?*

Although their knowledge of this topic was riddled with conflations and misconceptions, all 10 students knew that Europeans had discovered the New World, not knowing that it was there. Eight of them also knew that the discovery occurred because the Europeans were seeking a shorter route to China (Ned did not suggest reasons for the explorations, and Helen thought that Columbus was looking for a new place to live because Europe was getting too crowded). The students apparently picked up at least this much information in earlier units on Columbus Day and in their fourth-grade unit on Michigan history.

> *Tim*: It used to be just Asia and Africa and Europe and this French explorer guy, he wanted to get to China because he thought if he went across the Atlantic Ocean that he'd go to China. They found out it wasn't China so they called it the New World.
>
> *Brad*: There were ships that had to make shipments from across the ocean from the United States and they had to go to China and they wanted a shortcut so they thought, well if they just went around, they'd be there, but they found America and they called it the New World.
>
> *Sue*: The people up in London and England were looking for a new route to China for their fur trading, so they decided to go around here and they discovered these new lands, but they thought it was China and they finally found out that it wasn't.

Most responses garbled at least some of the details of the discovery of the New World. Of students who mentioned who did the exploring, four said the English, one the French, and one Columbus "from Europe." Suggested motivations included ships that had to make shipments from across the ocean, people wanting to get tea from China, fur trading with China (2), and seeking a less crowded place to live. As elaborated in their responses to the next question, these responses indicated that the students did not have much knowledge about the voyages of exploration.

13. Who were the explorers? What do you think explorers did?

Our question did not specifically mention the voyages of exploration of the New World, and not all of the students made this connection. Five students

referred to the New World or to discovering new lands in general, and four others mentioned explorers in Michigan (information gleaned from their fourth-grade Michigan history unit). Brad gave an interesting but essentially incorrect response that equated explorers with scientists (especially archeologists). The responses of the other nine students were generally correct as far as they went, indicating that the explorers were Europeans (sometimes specified as English and/or French, but not Spanish or Dutch) who came to "find" things. However, five students limited their statements to discovery of new land. The other four (Kay explicitly, and Jason, Helen, and Sue implicitly) added the notion that explorers did not just discover the existence of new lands but looked around them to find out what was there.

> *Mark*: I can think of a couple of their names. I don't know the first name, but Grenoble. He's one of them . . . they were people that were sailing across the sea to new land and see if they could figure out what to call it.
>
> *Brad*: Explorers try to find out things. They're kind of like people who find out the past and stuff that's happening right now.
>
> *Sue*: The ones I learned about were exploring around Michigan and the Upper Peninsula looking, and they were fur trading at forts . . . they sailed by boat from England.
>
> *Kay*: They traveled around Michigan and the Great Lakes . . . they came from French and they were trying to discover new land and see what the other world was like that they found. (How did they get there?) Across the ocean in a boat.

The students apparently believed that the explorers were operating on their own initiative rather than acting as commissioned agents of their governments. Mark made the interesting suggestion that an important job of the explorers was to "see if they could figure out what to call" the new land.

14. *Who discovered America? (If student says Christopher Columbus, ask if anyone else discovered America before he did.)*

Three students said that they knew but couldn't remember. The other seven said Columbus, although Rita first mentioned the Native Americans. Brad

also noted that there were people in America when Columbus discovered it, although he did not have a name for them. Tim, Ned, and Rita remembered hearing that people other than Columbus had discovered America, but they didn't know any details. In general, other than knowing Columbus's name, the students were vague here.

> *Tim*: Christopher Columbus. (Did you ever hear of anybody besides Columbus discovering America before he did?) It's in social studies but I don't remember.
>
> *Brad*: Christopher Columbus. (Did anybody else discover it before he did?) Well, there were people here when he discovered it. (Who were they?) I forgot.
>
> *Kay*: I forgot. We studied about it but I can't remember all the names. I don't know. (You said that there were explorers trying to get to China. Do you remember where they were from?) French.
>
> *Rita*: I think it was Native Americans. (Who discovered America from the Europeans?) Christopher Columbus or Christopher whoever. (Do you think any Europeans were here before him? He's the one that gets the credit usually.) Right, but I can't remember his name but I learned it. She didn't go into much detail because she said we'll learn it in fifth grade. (About Columbus?) Someone guessed Columbus for one of the answers and she said, well he came later on. (So you know somebody came even before Columbus but you're not sure who.) Yeah, there's seven people that started from . . . oh, gosh, what is it? I can't remember.

Perhaps what is most surprising in these answers is that all 10 students did not name Columbus immediately. One reason for this is that their knowledge was limited to second-grade Columbus Day lessons because, as Rita explains, the fourth-grade teacher decided not to get into Columbus in order to save the story of the European discovery of America for fifth grade. Other possible factors include the recent downgrading of Columbus in favor of the Vikings as the first European explorers of America, as well as the growing recognition that the whole notion of discovery of America is a Eurocentric idea that ignores the long-standing presence of Native Americans here. Concerning the latter factor, the students' fifth-grade teacher noted that the school has attempted to do a better job of teaching the students about Native Americans.

especially in fourth grade, and she was surprised that more of the students did not mention the Native Americans as the original discoverers.

15. *At first, the only people who lived in America were the Indians. Do you know where the Indians came from or how they got here?*

Apparently the material on Native Americans taught in Grades K-4 did not include the story of the land bridge or any other information about how the Indians came to America. None of the students had any information at all about this, and only Helen could even venture a guess (suggesting that they were descended from cave men).

16. *For a long time, the Indians were the only people who lived in America. But then some other people came and started colonies. Do you know what colonies are?*

In response to this question, Brad said that he knew but forgot and Jason gave the definition of a peninsula, but the other eight responses were correct at least in part. Teri knew only that colonies were sections of the continent. Mark and Tim knew in addition that these sections were claimed by someone, but they mentioned "people" or "explorers" instead of nations. Ned, Helen, and Kay described colonies not just as lands but as settlements, although they did not mention ownership claims by another nation. Finally, Rita (clearly) and Sue (possibly) recognized that ownership of colonies was claimed by a king or nation.

Jason: A piece of land surrounded by three parts of water.

Tim: Section of land that somebody owns. (Who owns it?) The explorers.

Mark: Little sections that people say they own.

Sue: There was English colonies . . . where the English owned the land of the English colonies. (OK, so the English owned the land, but what were the colonies then?) I don't know. (Who lived in the colonies?) English.

Helen: Like a community kind of. It's a whole bunch of people that started building houses back then, or tepees, but not buildings like this. The old-time houses and stuff like that. We don't have them now.

Like tepees, sort of, like the Indians used. They only had little areas. All they had was this one little room.

Rita: Land that someone claims for their king and they're like a state or a whole bunch of states. They're states that are bunched together.

The girls' responses to Question #16 were generally longer and more accurate than the boys' responses. The fifth-grade teacher suggested that perhaps the girls "connect" better with the Pilgrims and thus remember more about colonies than the boys do.

17. *Who lived in these colonies back then--who came to America and why did they come? (Probe for as many groups as the student can name, asking in each case who the people were, where they came from, and why they came.)*

Most students had trouble with this question. Jason, Mark, Brad, and Teri did not know or could not remember, and Tim, admittedly guessing, said that America was mainly just woods at the time so the people must have come for the lumber. Two students gave responses that were correct as far as they went but did not go very far. Rita named the Pilgrims but said nothing about them. Kay alluded to the idea that colonists came to find a new life with more freedom and opportunity, but her response sounded more like guesswork than knowledge. Among the remaining responses, Ned knew about people coming to escape oppression by the English king, Sue knew about people who came to trade for fur, and Helen knew some details about the Pilgrims.

Ned: Because of the king and they didn't like the rules. (Whose rules?) They king's . . . England.

Sue: They were looking for a new route to China and they came down and they wanted these lands 'cause it was valuable and so they fighted the Native Americans for it and so they got the land. (Do you know anything about who these people were who came to live?) No, we only learned about the people who came down and fur traded.

Helen: The Pilgrims came first on a boat called the Mayflower and that's how we got "April showers bring May flowers." The rock was Plymouth Rock where they settled. . . . I think it's in the Upper Peninsula somewhere . . . they didn't know how to survive the winter. They had just one little loaf of bread and it had to last them all winter. Then the Indians brought them food when the spring came for

Thanksgiving and that's how we got Thanksgiving. (Where did you learn all this?) Just hearing about it and learning it in third and fourth grade. Third I didn't learn that much. I learned about the Indians and the Pilgrims. In fourth grade I got the hang of what was going on and what really happened. I'm not saying in third grade all I learned was wrong, but in fourth I learned even more. (Do you know why they came to the New World?) I think their own world was getting wrecked by something. Someone was like trashing it. They were ruining their world and they had to find a new one, I guess. (Where was their world?) I think that was Europe.

Kay: They came to America because they wanted to see what the new land was like and see how many people were there . . . they came to find new life or to find a new home because they thought this was the new land and they could buy a big piece of land and they could do whatever they want.

Surprisingly, only three students mentioned the Pilgrims or their story, despite the frequency of Thanksgiving units and projects in Grades K-4 and despite their answers to the following question that indicate knowledge about the Pilgrims. The contrasts in responses to Questions #17 and 18 indicate that the students' knowledge of the Pilgrims was mostly restricted to a disconnected story of the first Thanksgiving, rather than being embedded within a larger network of knowledge about European (or at least English) colonization of the New World. Except for Teri who said that she didn't know, the girls' responses to Question #17 were notably longer than those of the boys. However, not much of what they said was substantive response to the question itself. In general, the students were vague about who came to America to settle and for what reasons.

Helen's response contains several interesting naive misconceptions (a vague but scary "someone" who was trashing the Old World and forcing people to find a new one) and conflations (the notion of a single loaf of bread to last all winter conflates what she has heard about the travails of the Pilgrims with ideas from fairy tales or from the miracle of the loaves and fishes as related in the Bible; her knowledge about the Mayflower is conflated with her knowledge of the "April showers bring May flowers" saying). It has not yet occurred to

her that the Mayflower was named because of prior recognition that flowers bloom in May (in England) rather than vice versa.

We find it noteworthy but ironic that Helen alludes to the notion that maybe what she was taught in earlier grades was wrong and that she is now finding out what "really happened." Given that much of what is taught in Grades K-4 social studies is mythical or at least sanitized (Brophy, 1990; Larkins, Hawkins, & Gilmore, 1987), we wondered if the fifth graders we interviewed would say anything about having been taught misinformation. Helen's comment quoted here was the only such evidence in these interviews. We think it is worth noting, but we do not put much emphasis on it, for two reasons. First, the statement is suggestive but still ambiguous. It does not directly state that Helen believes that she was deliberately taught misinformation in earlier grades. Second, the statement is hard to take seriously because it comes from Helen, who ironically was the student most given to constructing lengthy narrative responses that were riddled with misconceptions, conflations, and imaginative elaborations. Thus, the students' responses do not provide evidence that they have so far become aware, let alone resentful, of any misinformation that they may have been taught in the past.

18. Who were the Pilgrims and why did they come?

Responses to this question indicate that, when asked directly, all of the students had at least some information about the Pilgrims. Rita knew much of the story because she had ancestors on the Mayflower and had both heard information from her family and read a book on the topic. Various other students supplied the following items of information: The Pilgrims came on the Mayflower (6); Indians helped them, leading to the first Thanksgiving (5); they landed at Plymouth Rock (4); they came from England (3); they experienced hard

times at first (3); they came to escape an oppressive king (2); they built their own houses (2); and they came for religious freedom (1).

> *Jason*: They came when Columbus came to America. (Do you know why the Pilgrims came here?) To get away from England because the king was mean. (How do you know that?) Movies. Third grade.
>
> *Mark*: Probably more than half of them came over on the Mayflower. They came from, I think, from England. They thought if they went there they would be free from the king. . . . They probably didn't like him bossing them around.
>
> *Brad*: They came on the Mayflower and they were here after the Indians were and they settled with the Indians and they had a feast on Thanksgiving Day and that's how Thanksgiving got here. They came here to find new land but I don't know where they came from.
>
> *Teri*: They landed on Plymouth Rock and they sailed across the ocean and their ship was called the Mayflower and that's all I know about them.
>
> *Sue*: They sailed across the ocean. A lot of them died.
>
> *Rita*: They came from England. They didn't want to go to a certain church just because the king said they had to go to this certain church, and you have to worship my god or whoever. They went off, without asking, and they landed on Plymouth Rock and they met the Native Americans--they didn't meet the Native Americans at first but it was like getting fall so they had to hurry up and build their houses and lots of Pilgrims died. Then in the spring the survivors met the Native Americans and the Native Americans helped the Pilgrims to survive.

Except for Rita, who had so much extra information, the students framed their details within the "how Thanksgiving got started" story rather than within a "Pilgrims" story. They were vague about who the Pilgrims were or why they had come to America. Even the two boys who mentioned escaping the king envisioned getting away from a mean bully rather than achieving religious freedom.

The girls generally supplied more details than the boys, especially concerning Plymouth Rock and hard times. The students' fifth-grade teacher believes that the notion of hard times and several other aspects of the Pilgrims' story connect to ideas about family life and women's roles in ways that make this material more interesting to the girls than the boys.

Jason's response indicated that he did not realize that more than a hundred years elapsed between Columbus and the Pilgrims. In general, the students' knowledge of the time lines involved here was fuzzy at best.

19. *Who owned the American colonies back then? What country was in charge? (If students do not know or answer incorrectly, tell them that England was in charge then.)*

The students were unclear about this. Three didn't know, three said the British immediately, one initially said nobody but then mentioned England after probing, two said the Indians, and one said the French. Most of the students answered in just a few words. The few who struggled to construct a lengthier response in the absence of sufficient background knowledge produced confusing answers, as Helen's response indicates.

> *Helen*: I think the Indians maybe because the Indians were there before the Pilgrims were. The Indians were the first. Columbus and that other guy were there and then they died and the Indians came. Then there were the Pilgrims. So the colonies belonged to the Indians. I'm guessing.

20. *So for many years the American settlements were English colonies, but later they became the United States. Do you know how that happened?*

Seven students, including all five girls, simply didn't know. Two students mentioned wars but were vague or incorrect about who fought or why.

> *Jason*: Wars. (Who was fighting?) France.

> *Tim*: The Constitution . . . they wrote a bunch of rules and it was the Constitution . . . because they wanted to become a country. (Why?) The people from England, the kings, they wanted to rule the world. They wanted more land. (Where did you hear about all of this?) Social studies and just books. There's a book on presidents that I read and it has all that stuff in it.

> *Brad*: Well, first it was the unknown land, the English colonies that the British owned, and in between those two were, I forgot what you call them, but then they started and they called the English colonies the U.S. But they changed it and later they started fighting and stuff and they were fighting over Michigan, but I forgot how the unknown lands and the rest of the lands became the U.S.

> *Helen*: I don't know. World War I?

Even Tim, who cites the signing of the Constitution as the beginning of the country, is vague about how this came about. He seems to think that people came from England and signed the Constitution on behalf of the king, perhaps believing that this officially made it a country in the eyes of England and thus took it away from the Native Americans. Brad's response conflates vaguely remembered information about the American Revolution with vaguely remembered information about the French and Indian War learned in his Michigan history unit. In general, the students' responses to the past several questions indicate that they were vague about the origins of the country. Even if they knew about a war or the signing of the Constitution, they were not clear about who fought it or who signed it.

21. *(If necessary) . . . Have you heard of the Revolutionary War, or the War for Independence? (If yes: What do you know about that war?)*

Responses to this question built on earlier ones and revealed a combination of ignorance, guesswork, and conflation with information about the French and Indian War learned in the Michigan history unit. All of the students had at least heard something about the Revolutionary War, and all but Ned said something specific about it. However, what they said was mostly guesswork. Three students' responses were correct in their entirety, but the remaining responses included incorrect elements. Various students had the Americans fighting the French, the English fighting the British, the English fighting the French, or a war over northern Michigan fought by unnamed forces.

> *Tim*: It was the British and the English colonies and the Indians were on the British side because they wanted to have that land still. The British wanted it too but they were going to share the land and so English colonies won.

> *Brad*: I've heard of it. I think it was the war when they were fighting over the top of the lower peninsula [of Michigan].

Sue: The British and the Americans fought. We learned it. The British wanted Michigan and the Native Americans fought the British and the British won and they got Michigan.

Helen: The British and the Americans. (Who won?) The British. (OK. How did the United States come to be?) The United States was really poor and it didn't have that much, but the British had fabulous stuff and they weren't poor. They had clothes and stuff like that. Then America was just this poor country. There were people there but they weren't the richest part of the world. The British agreed to never fight the Americans again and America agreed to that. They never fought again but the British, I'm not sure about this part, but I think the British went against their promise and the British left and they had to do something like sign a paper or something to get it together, a promise, and then the British left and they never got to sign or do whatever they had to do to make the promise, but then a few years later, I think they fought. But this time, America was rich and had a lot of soldiers and the Americans won over the British and that's how we got our country.

Kay: I think they fought for freedom. (Who?) I think the Native Americans and the French. No, the English and the French.

The students' fifth-grade teacher is aware of their tendency to conflate the Revolutionary War with the French and Indian War (part of the larger Seven Years War for Empire between England and France). She attempts to help them sort out these wars and their political and economic implications, although she believes that even fifth graders are not yet cognitively ready for some of the complexities involved.

The students' responses to Questions 16-21 about the colonies and the Revolution showed the same general trends that McKeown and Beck (1990) found in fifth graders who had studied American history through the colonial unit but had not yet studied the Revolution (except that, as would be expected, our fourth graders knew even less than their fifth graders did). McKeown and Beck reported that although many fifth graders understood that the colonies were settlements established in the New World, they were vague about how they were governed, about their relationship with England, and about how they became an independent country. If they mentioned that a war was involved, they were likely to be confused about the combatants and to conflate elements of the

Revolutionary War with elements of other wars, especially the French and Indian War. They also did not know much about the Declaration of Independence or the role of the concept of freedom in motivating and explaining the Revolution. In general, our findings replicate those of McKeown and Beck and support their conclusion that, in addition to teaching basic facts about the American Revolution, fifth-grade teachers will need to embed these facts within an organizing framework that will allow the students to understand them meaningfully, as well as to correct some conflations and misconceptions that the students have accumulated along the way.

22. *Have you heard about the Civil War? (If yes: What do you know about that war?)*

All of the students except Sue said that they had heard of the Civil War, but none of them had accurate information about it. Tim was the only student who ventured a substantive response. He was initially correct on the idea that the North fought the South, but as he elaborated he wandered into the French and Indian War. Also, he described the Civil War as a fight over land rather than slavery and other issues.

> *Tim*: I don't think it's the one in 1865. It's close to the 1900s. Isn't that World War I? (It was the one in 1865. World War I was later. Do you know anything about the Civil War in 1865? What was that all about?) It was the North and the South and the South wanted all the land and the North wanted all the land and it was mainly the English colonies and just this little [uses hand gesture to indicate border between English colonies and French territories that he has seen on a map] right down the middle of the country. It was called the territories and they split it in half and then it was the North and South and the West was unknown land so they battled for the country . . . because they wanted the whole country to themselves. (Where did you learn all this?) From books.

> *Helen*: Yeah, sort of . . . (What do you know about it?) Not a lot. (Do you know who fought whom?) I think the British and the French.

Except for Tim, these students entered fifth grade with no knowledge of the Civil War. The award-winning PBS series on the Civil War was broadcast early in their fifth-grade year, but their teacher reports that none of them

saw it. She believes that most of the series was "over their heads" in any case, even though it is excellent for older students and adults. She adds that many of the students have seen or will see (as it becomes available in videotape) the movie *Glory*, however, and that information gleaned from this movie may show up in our subsequent interviews before and after the students' fifth-grade Civil War unit.

23. *Have you heard about wagon trains, or the frontier, or the pioneers? (Allow child to make an initial statement and then probe about each of these three terms. Without asking directly, determine if the child has some knowledge of westward expansion of the nation from an east coast base.)*

Eight of the students (all but Teri and Brad) made substantive responses to this question. However, the responses focused almost exclusively on wagon transportation. None of the students could say anything at all about the frontier, and few said anything about pioneers or wagon trains as such (i.e., as columns of wagons traveling together as a group).

Jason: They were pulled by horses. (Who used them?) Pioneers. (Where were they going?) West.

Tim: Horses pulled them. They pulled the wagon for their transportation. (Who?) Cowboys. (Why'd you say cowboys?) Because they were around. (Tell me about the pioneers, who they were, what they did?) They were people that chopped down trees. In America. Because there was more lumber and more trees out there.

Mark: Usually they didn't stay in one spot for that long. They usually moved a lot. (Who?) The people that used the carriages. (Why?) Maybe the land would get too dry and if they had anything like corn planted there, then that might dry up and die and they might move someplace where the land has water. (Would they move in any particular way?) Usually I think they moved west. (Why?) I don't know. (What about the frontier? Do you know what that was or what that means?) Not really.

Ned: They're wagons with horses pulling them. They're used to carry people and stuff, like they're traveling . . . to settle somewhere.

Sue They traveled and traveled and they didn't have any car so they had to travel in those wagons. (Who were they and why were they in these wagon trains?) I don't know.

Helen: It's the way they got around back then. Now we have cars but back then they had horses and wagons. (Where did they go with the wagons?) Wherever they could go. (Do you know what a wagon train is?) No. (Let me try another word--pioneers.) That's the English settlement, like people that rode--we had that as a word in our spelling bee. It's like with the horse, it would be the rider. It's the person that's in the thing and traveling to the place. It's like the wagon part and the horse part. It's the person in the wagon getting pulled. (Where are they going?) As far as they can go. (How about frontier?) No.

Kay: Wagon trains, yeah, I think they were carriages that pulled people around and horses pulled them. (Do you know who the people were or why they were in these wagon trains?) They were in the wagon trains to get around, so they didn't have to walk or ride horseback. (Where were they going?) Maybe to town or to their relatives.

Rita: There was a whole bunch of those [points to a model conestoga wagon in the classroom] and it looks like a train but it's not. Do you know who the people were and why they were doing that?) It might have been the English. I don't know. (OK, do you know anything about the frontier?) Not a lot. (How about pioneers?) I've heard of that. Are they sort of like the explorers? They try to explore the land but they're a little bit or a lot different?

Clearly, most of the students knew that horse-drawn carriages were the primary means of transportation at the time, but they spoke about transportation in general or about local transportation rather than speaking specifically about wagon trains moving westward to the frontier. Much of this probably was gleaned from movies about the Old West. Jason and Mark mentioned traveling westward and Ned mentioned settlers, but otherwise there was no stated or implied connection of wagon trains with the frontier or the pioneers. Only Rita understood that wagon trains involved groups of people moving together.

Seven students made no specific response to pioneers, although Jason's response could be taken as implying knowledge that the pioneers were people who moved west, and Ned's could be taken as recognizing that the settlers were called pioneers. Of those who spoke directly to the question, Tim thought that pioneers were people who chopped down trees (given his answer to Question #17, he may be thinking of company workers who chopped down trees to be shipped back to Europe, rather than settlers clearing land and building homes); Rita thought

that pioneers were people who explored the new land; and Helen thought that the pioneers were the English settlers who traveled in the wagons. Helen's response at least approaches correctness, but no student said that pioneers were the first settlers in an area.

In general, then, although the students were well aware that the people relied on horse-drawn vehicles for transportation prior to the invention of motor-driven vehicles, they had no knowledge of westward expansion and the frontier as important themes in early American history.

Discussion

The students' responses bear out their fifth-grade teacher's perception that most entering fifth graders, if they have been exposed to a typical K-4 social studies program that does not include a chronologically organized course or series of units on history, lack familiarity with history as a discipline or area of study. They do have general familiarity with "life in the olden days," and they usually have been exposed to some historical information through lessons on holiday themes or units on Native Americans or state history, but they have not yet learned much if anything about the history of the nation *as a nation*. This suggests the need for fifth-grade teachers to establish a context for studying American history before plunging into the content itself. In addition, the prevalence of certain naive misconceptions and conflations in the students' responses to our questions suggests the need to develop certain key ideas in depth in developing the content.

Establishing a Context for Studying American History

Because the systematic study of chronologically organized American history is new to them, the students will need a schematic framework (or what McKeown & Beck, 1990, call a "semantic net") within which to situate their

understandings and constructions in this subject area. We believe that such a framework must subsume at least two key components.

First, the students will need to learn about history as a discipline, or at least as an area of study. Our interviewees' responses to questions about history and the work of historians suggest that several key ideas will need to be emphasized because they will be new to most entering fifth graders. First, the study of history can include anything about life or events in the past, not just the exploits of famous people. Also, "the past" includes the very recent past, not just ancient times. Thus, their families and they themselves have histories too.

Students will also need to learn that history is interpretive--that although some basic facts can be established unequivocally through objective evidence (such as that a significant event did in fact occur on or about a particular date), most of the questions that historians deal with concern the motives for or causes of events or their subsequent consequences, and much of the evidence that they have to work with is at best suggestive and open to alternative interpretations. Ultimately, the students themselves will have to "act as historians" by deciding what to believe, based on critical reading of the evidence cited in support of the arguments advanced in various accounts. Fifth graders are not yet ready for exigesis of the fine points of American history, but they can at least begin to understand and appreciate its interpretive nature by considering such issues as the disputes over who discovered America or the contrasting views of King George and of the American rebels concerning the events leading up to the Declaration of Independence (see Wineburg & Wilson, 1991, on this point).

Fifth graders also will need information about how historians gather and sift information to develop their interpretations. In particular, they will

need to learn that historians work not only with physical artifacts from archeological digs and interviews of living witnesses to past events but also (and especially, in most cases) with photographs and with written sources of information such as books, newspapers, diaries, letters, and public records. Our interviewees' fifth-grade teacher introduces students to most of these key ideas by beginning the year with a unit on history and the work of historians. During this unit, the students apply what they are learning by acting as historians by developing a history of their own lives. They interview their parents, conduct research to find out what important events were occurring on or around their birth dates, select artifacts that represent key events in their lives (e.g., photos from past birthdays or vacations), and then assemble this information into a montage, organized along a time line extending from their birth date to the present, to represent their life histories to date. Using their work on this assignment as a base, their teacher then helps the students to understand that historians similarly work by assembling a variety of evidence and then attempting to reconstruct a coherent story from it.

The second major component to a schematic framework for anchoring the study of American history involves helping their students to see how American history fits within the broader sweep of recorded history in general. This does not mean that fifth graders must start with the beginnings of recorded history and proceed forward in strict chronological order, but it does mean that American history will need to be contextualized with reference to time lines, landmark events and inventions, and social and political developments. We believe that an adequate context for supporting introduction to American history would include (a) introduction to several broad themes in sociopolitical developments through time (progressions from nomadic hunting and gathering societies, to stable but small farming communities, to the rise of towns as

centers of commerce and culture, to city-states and federations, to larger nations and progression in European perceptions from a world centered around the Mediterranean, to a world centered around the Middle East, to a world centered around the Atlantic coast of Europe); (b) life in Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries (modern in many respects but without engine-powered transportation, electronic communications, etc.); and (c) the leading European nations' economic agendas and rivalries (shipbuilding and navigation advances that increased the scope and importance of trade with other nations, search for better routes to the Far East, and the establishment of colonies).

Such a context would provide students with a much better sense of who the different people that they were studying were, what agendas they were pursuing, and what resources they had available to them. A few lessons spent establishing such a context should go a long way toward helping students to remain aware of relevant time lines (and what they represent about conditions of everyday life and about political and economic world developments) as they study American history. They also would help to minimize the degree to which learning was distorted by naive misconceptions, conflations, and fanciful elaborations (see VanSledright & Brophy, 1991, on this point).

Teachers should help their students to appreciate the value of history as a subject of study. In particular, we recommend stressing two advantages to historical study that had not even occurred to most of our interviewees. First, although it also has social science aspects, history is one of the humanities and thus is worthy of study as such: It can enhance the quality of life. Learning about and reflecting on history can enhance one's sense of identity by helping one to "place" oneself within the broad sweep of the human condition. Experiences in this area can be powerful for individuals of all ages but especially children who still have a strong potential for

experiencing awe and wonder at aspects of the human condition that they become aware of for the first time. They also can learn to appreciate the history that is all around them and to enjoy reading about history and visiting historical sites. A second major advantage to studying history is its value as citizen education. A good working knowledge of history will include a great deal of information about the behavior of individuals and nations in various decision-making situations that repeat themselves periodically because they are part of the human condition. Armed with knowledge about the probable trade-offs involved in various courses of action (based in part on knowledge about the outcomes that these courses of action have led to in the past), students will be better prepared to make good personal, social, and civic decisions.

Key Ideas to Be Developed

Once into the content of American history as such, fifth-grade teachers will need to develop certain key ideas in depth in order to avoid the misconceptions and conflations voiced by our interviewees. In teaching about the beginnings of the country, for example, they will have to help their students sort out several related confusions that are common developmentally and complicated by the ambiguities involved in several fuzzy terms. "Colony" and "nation" (or "country") are two such terms. Our interviewees' responses suggest that most entering fifth graders are vague or confused about the concept of a nation as a political entity. They can locate England and France on a map and they know that people called the English live in England and people called the French live in France, but they are not very clear about the governments that make England or France nations or what distinguishes them from their neighbors other than a borderline on a map.

Given this vagueness in understanding the concept of a nation, students are likely to be even vaguer, or more likely confused, about the concept of a colony as a geographical area located outside of a nation but still ruled by that nation. If the 13 English colonies were not England but also were not the United States, what were they? And why were they "colonies" when the regions north of them were "Canada" or "land claimed by the French" and the regions south of them were "Florida" or "land claimed by the Spanish?" Such questions are difficult and confusing for fifth graders encountering American history for the first time, and they are complicated by linguistic ambiguities. Terms such as the "New World" or "America" are usually meant and understood to refer to the continental land mass (or at least the eastern seaboard of it), but terms like "country," "nation," or "colony" can be taken to refer either to land (the geographic area subsumed by the political entity) or to people (the people living on that segment of land--understood by adults but not necessarily by fifth graders as organized into a political entity called a colony or a nation).

Fifth-grade teachers will have to help their students develop initial understandings of nations as political entities and national governments as agents that not only rule them but act on their behalf (such as by commissioning voyages of exploration, staking land claims, and establishing colonies). With this idea in place, the students would be in a better position to understand the meanings and implications of the discovery and exploration of the New World by agents commissioned by European governments, the claiming of land in the name of those governments, and the later colonizing of those lands by those governments.

Fifth graders could also profit from specific attention to some of the other ambiguities surrounding the origins and development of the United States as a nation. For example, they should learn that the very idea of discovery o:

the New World and the associated notions of exploration, land claims, and colonizing are all part of a story told from the European point of view; the same basic events would be included in the story as constructed from the Native American point of view, but those events would be interpreted quite differently. Similarly, the emphasis on western movement from an eastern seaboard base in describing the development of American history is a story told primarily from the English point of view; the Spanish point of view produces a story emphasizing movement north and east from a southwestern base. The English story fits the northern and eastern states reasonably well, but the Spanish story is more relevant as a basis for understanding the history of the southwestern states.

In learning about exploration and colonization, students will need to understand that the Europeans were preoccupied with seeking trade routes to the Far East and with searching for gold and other "riches" of the time, so that at first they did not realize that a "whole new world" lay to the west. Furthermore, even as this realization grew, they were not especially eager to colonize the New World because their explorers did not report finding much of value there (except for the Spanish explorers' tales of gold in Central America). Eventually, though, trading posts and other government-commissioned permanent settlements started to appear, and still later, people began to come as immigrants with the intention of staying permanently.

Students will need to understand that land claims made by the explorers on behalf of their sponsoring governments led to political control and colonization of particular parts of the New World by particular European countries. The fifth-grade teacher of the students whom we interviewed uses flags as visual symbols of land claims and political control, noting that the explorers "sailed under" the flags of their sponsoring nations and "planted" those flags

on the lands that they claimed for those nations and that later ships, armies, and political administrators colonized and ruled those lands while operating under those same flags.

Some important themes can be established in teaching about this period. In addition to crediting Columbus and other earlier explorers for their accomplishments, teachers can call attention to their cavalier treatment of the Native Americans that they encountered and note that this was the beginning of what became a persistent theme as European settlers came to the New World and began advancing the frontiers of their settlements. It also could be noted that, although many of the earliest settlers were sent by governments or companies to accomplish economic agendas, many were people who chose to come to attain personal freedom or seek a better life, thus initiating a tradition of the New World as a land of freedom and opportunity that persists through the present and has produced Western hemisphere nations that are much more diverse in their racial and ethnic composition than European nations are.

The content currently taught about Native Americans in most fifth-grade textbooks appears appropriate. It emphasizes their migration from Asia across the land bridge and their spreading out across North and South America, developing diverse economies, customs, and cultures. To help students understand the threads linking historical events as they unfold along the time line, however, it would be important to make sure that they realize that the immigrant Europeans were able to keep advancing their frontiers because they enjoyed significant weaponry and technological advantages over the Native Americans and gradually came to outnumber them, the more so over time. Thus, the Native Americans could not effectively resist the advancing frontier, even when they tried to do so.

In addition to the ambiguity mentioned already (colony as land area versus colony as political entity), some additional ambiguities surrounding the term "colony" must be addressed when children learn about the English colonies. The term "colony" is usually applied to the early settlements at Jamestown and Plymouth, thus creating the initial idea that a colony is a small settlement involving perhaps a few dozen to a few hundred people. At this stage, the children are likely to envision a colony as essentially a small village, albeit one surrounded by a stockade. Later, however, the term "colony" will be used to refer to the much larger geographical areas that later became the first 13 states. Many children will not realize when the term begins to be used with this second meaning unless it is pointed out to them directly. Such children may not fully appreciate that over 150 years elapsed between the founding of the earliest settlements and the initiation of the American Revolution and that during that time the meaning of the term "colony" shifted from a small and isolated settlement to a much larger and more populous collection of communities that operated in many ways like a modern state (except that it was under the dominion of England).

Without such knowledge, children will not understand the size and scope of the Revolutionary War and the nation that emerged from it. Fifth graders may respond better to narrative approaches built around the exploits of a few key individuals than to more impersonal accounts of the colonies and the American Revolution, but this should not be carried to the point that students think of the Revolution as a few villages telling King George that they weren't going to listen to him anymore. They should understand that it was a political revolution in which 13 sizeable and populous American colonies agreed to unite and break away from England to establish a new nation.

The children that we interviewed knew so little about events subsequent to the American Revolution that teaching can focus on establishing accurate initial ideas rather than on correcting misconceptions. One partial exception to this, however, concerns the reasons why wars are fought. Some students' understandings appear to restrict the concept of wars to wars of acquisition, in which one nation attempts to take land away from another. These students will need to learn that wars are sometimes fought for other reasons, such as to preserve or change institutionalized policies (e.g., slavery) or access to resources (e.g., oil).

How to Handle State History

Students' frequent conflations involving information remembered from their Michigan history unit raise questions about the wisdom of attempting to teach state history prior to teaching American history. One could argue that students would experience less confusion if they got the American history first. This would seem to be true even for the eastern seaboard states, all the more true for the states in the middle of the country that were established later, and especially true for the southwestern states whose histories featured Spanish rather than English colonization.

If American history were taught first, what would happen to state history in the elementary social studies curriculum? Some might argue for its elimination, noting that state history appears to be less important than it once was as citizen preparation, for three reasons. First, the influence of the federal government has increasingly overshadowed that of the states, to the point that, in most states at least, national and even international affairs receive much more media coverage and policy debate than state affairs. Second, even though it is much larger, the nation is a more comprehensible entity to children than

the states are, and students usually show earlier and more accurate knowledge of the nation than of the state or region. Third, the marked residential mobility of the American population means that many students will move from one state to another, often several times. This again raises questions about the relevance of teaching state history in any systematic way to elementary students.

We would suggest, however, that instead of being eliminated all together, state history should be included within the American history taught in fifth grade. Depending on the state, this could be accomplished most easily either by incorporating state history content within the more general American history content as it unfolded (this would be most appropriate for the original 13 states) or by teaching a separate state history unit following the American history content (this would be best for most, if not all, of the other states). This would involve some adjustments in the traditionally adopted expanding communities framework for organizing the elementary social studies curriculum. We believe that the expanding communities framework makes reasonable sense (although it is probably not essential) for organizing the sociological, cultural, and geographical strands of elementary social studies but that history may be taught more effectively by beginning with larger entities (to provide a context) and only then working into state and local aspects.

This approach would still leave room for a great deal of emphasis on the state in teaching regional geography (and related social and cultural content) in fourth grade. Although brief references to historical developments would be included (e.g., noting that fur trading was important in Michigan's early economic history, and that logging, farming and orchards, and the auto industry became important later), chronological and systematic treatment of state history would be saved for fifth grade. This would minimize development of the

conflations with state history that were observed so frequently in our interviewees.

Subsequent interviews with these 10 students have shown how persistent these conflations can be. For example, despite their fifth-grade teacher's attempts to dislodge them, consistent confusions about the role of Michigan history relative to the French and Indian War stubbornly reappear as they study the developments leading up to the American Revolution. For these students, Michigan history appears to exist independently of the history of the nation as a whole. They have difficulty understanding that Michigan statehood came considerably later and that for a long time, Michigan was part of a territory rather than a state.

Achievement Level Differences

The achievement level difference trends seen in the data are interesting, if limited. There were tendencies for the higher achieving students to have more, and more accurate, information to bring to bear in response to our questions, but these tendencies were much weaker than they usually are for school subjects that students have been learning for some time. This underscores the fact that most of the information taught in the fifth-grade history course was new to these students. When individuals possessed information about particular items, they usually did so because of unique interests or family experiences rather than because of reasons connected to their general abilities or prior school achievement. Thus, in most school districts, fifth-grade American history courses provide opportunities to observe teaching and learning of content that is for the most part as new to the higher achievers as it is to the lower achievers and where few, if any, of the students possess much experience-based knowledge to work from.

Among the 10 students we interviewed, the higher achievers tended to know more about history and the work of historians and about the Revolutionary War and westward expansion from the original colonies. However, the lower achievers knew as much or more about the colonies and the reasons why people came to live in them. The latter knowledge was centered around stories of the Pilgrims seeking to escape oppression or experiencing hard times in the New World. Perhaps something about these story elements appeals to low achievers in particular, making them more likely than higher achievers to remember these elements (or at least, to spontaneously report them in response to our questions).

Gender Differences

There were minor but noteworthy gender differences in both style and substance of response. The girls generally had more to say than the boys, especially about the Pilgrims and about everyday life in "the olden days." The boys had more to say about wars. These differences reflect traditional gender-role differences in interests. They do not appear to be of great importance, given that there was little or no tendency for longer responses to be better informed or more accurate responses.

The girls were more likely than the boys to mention asking a parent, a teacher, or some other adult for help when deciding what to believe if historical sources disagreed. This difference may have been a manifestation of more general gender differences in cognitive style (field independence vs. field dependence) or preferences for individual versus social problem-solving contexts. Finally, the girls were more likely than the boys to be "thrown" by the notion that they had a personal life history that could be recorded. This may be an indication that we still have a ways to go in helping children in general and girls in particular to realize that history is not just about famous *men*,

but about all people, male and female, famous or not. To help get this message across to the children we interviewed, their fifth-grade teacher makes a point of including attention to everyday living and women's roles in each of her history units and emphasizes the roles that several women played in the American Revolution.

Conclusion

Along with related data reported by Levstik and Pappas (1987) and McKeown and Beck (1990), our findings indicate that entering fifth graders are interested in history, familiar with the narrative format, and already in possession of some accurate knowledge about the past. These findings also indicate, however, that such children are vague about the interpretive nature of history and the work of historians, have not yet developed a stable and coherent network of basic knowledge that can effectively anchor their historical studies, and are likely to harbor various conflations and misconceptions that will need to be corrected. We believe that it is possible to address these problems and teach American history to fifth graders in ways that emphasize understanding, appreciation, and application to life outside of school, but that doing so will require helping students to see the value of history as a humanity and as preparation for citizenship, as well as establishing an initial framework that locates American history within the broader sweep of what is known about the evolution of the human condition.

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